

The Crystal Palace – the Sydenham Strip

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The world in your hands

On June 10th 1854, the Crystal Palace, which had been removed from Hyde Park and relocated to Sydenham, re-opened as a permanent museum designed to ‘receive, instruct, amuse and interest a thronging multitude’. Before even entering the building, visitors could wander in gardens laid out to demonstrate the history of gardening, or sit by the artificial lake, populated by models of wallowing dinosaurs. Inside, the main nave was framed by wings containing the departments of Raw Produce and Natural History, and bisected by the Grand Transept, the concert area and sculpture collections of which served as a focus for the whole exhibition.

From this transept ran the two central elements of the Palace: to the north, the department of the History of Art and to the south, the industrial exhibits. Both departments were further subdivided through the creation of individual courts: on the south, each space housed a different form of manufacture: for example, the Sheffield Court, a showcase for steel products. The aim of the northern courts was to provide a history of artistic achievement, by bringing together copies and models of monuments and art works representative of key eras, beginning with Egypt and ending with the Renaissance. The directors of this department, Digby Wyatt & Owen Jones, had travelled the world taking traces and measurements of monuments so they could be accurately recreated. The ancient world played a prominent role, represented by a sculpture collection in the Transept and three courts dedicated to Greece, Rome and Pompeii.

Questions of colour

The courts of Greece and Rome provide a fascinating insight into mid-nineteenth century Britain’s vision of the ‘Classical heritage’. The façade of the Greek Court was modelled on the Temple of Jupiter at Nemea and inscribed with excerpts from Herodotus and Thucydides’ Periclean Funeral Oration. Inside, visitors found themselves in a Greek agora and could view a scale model of the Parthenon. The 22ft-high façade of the Roman Court imitated the lower storey of the Colosseum and the Pompeian Court was laid out as a Pompeian house. The courts served as a backdrop for an extensive sculpture collection, which, along with the Transept sculpture collection, contained casts of all of antiquity’s greatest hits: the Laocöon, the Aphrodite of Cnidus and the colossal Farnese Hercules amongst them.

The guidebooks to the courts reflect contemporary debates about ancient art. Most controversial of these was the question of whether Greek sculpture had been painted. Whilst this debate had been raging for some time, the Crystal Palace exhibition allowed practical experimentation through the exhibition of a fully painted cast of the Parthenon Frieze. Owen Jones’ decision to include this exhibit aroused such controversy that it necessitated the publication of an explanatory Apology (or ‘defence speech’) justifying the authenticity of the display. But why did the Crystal Palace become the place to debate the question of the

painting of the Parthenon sculptures, when the real marbles were lounging up the road in the British Museum?

A nation of shopkeepers

Despite the high profile of the Crystal Palace, the Sydenham venture was financed by speculating investors, not the public purse. Its very site was explicitly chosen to boost the profits of the London-to-Brighton railway line. Indeed, the chairmen of the railway and of the Crystal Palace Company were the one and the same, Mr Laing. But though predominantly preoccupied with the celebration of British manufacture, Laing emphasised his noble quest to combine profit with instruction and private enterprise’s enthusiasm to respond to the ‘interests of civilisation’.

However, the way that private enterprise chose to present civilisation was very different from the vision of the civic museums. Despite ostensibly sharing the same taste as those institutions, displaying casts of many of their prize exhibits, the Palace was presented as a competitive alternative, not as an imitator. The members of the board were clearly well aware that they were appealing to different audiences than were catered for by the state. The Raw Produce Department was, for example, hailed as England’s first Trade Museum, plugging a gap that had long denied commercial men a facility to celebrate their industrial heritage and contribution to the country’s prosperity.

Pop Pompeii

The art departments were not simply poor relations, hovering on the fringes of such novel exhibitions. Innovation was also applied here, with a specific aim to ‘prevent the monotony that attaches to a mere museum arrangement’. The Pompeii Court was described as the most extensive display of Pompeian art in England, providing ‘the sole’ and the ‘most agreeable method’ by which the public might experience Pompeii. The recreations of these courts provided a completely new experience to their audiences. The models and casts allowed the public to get close to the ancient world in a manner denied them by museum collections. Coming face to face with imperial Rome was a shock to some. A journalist reviewing the Roman court was positively horrified by the busts of notorious imperial women, (Livia, Messalina et al. were all represented in the sculpture galleries) having to admit that ‘it is startling to find them so like the women that one sees everyday’!

Alibis

The key to this new experience was undoubtedly the fact that, throughout the Crystal Palace, nothing was original. From temple to dinosaur, everything on display was cast, traced or imagined. The beginning of the nineteenth century had seen the British Museum and Louvre squaring up, pitting against each other their prize exhibits, the Elgin marbles and the Venus de Milo. But while states and nations might wrangle over prized originals, the Crystal Palace had both on display. The exhibits,

for sight of which the Grand Tourists had scoured Europe, were all here in one place. In bringing these artefacts together, the curators invented a fantasy ancient world that would envelop the visitor. Of course, it was a completely bogus world where Agrippina the Elder (early first century A.D.) stood next to Antinous (mid-second century A.D.), but a world that seemed so alive that the Parthenon marbles were still freshly painted. The Crystal Palace presented an antiquity geared for the era of mass production in which any material whim might be satisfied.

After all, this was an exhibition in which the machines that churned out souvenir medals and prints were on show as proudly as the end products themselves. Indeed, a museum in which the building and techniques of reproduction were as feted as the exhibits and where those exhibits were nothing more than raw materials. Just as the mineral, vegetable and animal resources exhibited in the Geology, Raw Produce and Natural History departments were fashioned into commodities in the trade stands, so the art courts provided inspiration and patterns for exhibiting craftsmen. Like the Pompeian panels in the Pompeii Court? Then why not repair to the Furniture Court, where R. Horne would be more than delighted to sell you his 'Pompeian and other Panelled Decorations'?

Mass culture

But as well as being an exhibition celebrating mass production it also catered for a mass audience, accessible to anybody who could manage the entrance fee. In trying to convince the British people of the worth of trade, the board went out of its way to serve new interests and new audiences. At every turn the company impressed its desire to include a wide audience: the handbooks were advertised as being as cheap, accessible and written in a 'popular style'. The show played on its ability to enable its audience to access treasures locked away in collections across the world. These – notably that of the Pope, who refused to play along by allowing casts to be made of their collections – were openly named and shamed. The past was, it was proclaimed, for everybody.

The organisers were perhaps not as successful as they might have hoped. The author of a musical skit, lampooning the opening ceremony of the Palace, refers to those courts as the 'Love-of-Fine-Arts-Inculcation Department'. On April 22nd, the Illustrated London News voiced the suspicion that the endless sculpture casts 'will be found not very attractive out of a small circle of enthusiasts' and was quick to point out that the trade stands subsidised the rest of the exhibition. The casts were long gone by the time the Crystal Palace burnt down in 1936.

Ultimately, then, the Crystal Palace might be dismissed as a glorious failure. But for a time, the Crystal Palace helped to redefine who could access the past and how they might do that, and even to provide new pasts for new audiences. It is profoundly overlooked in reception studies but it surely represents a crucial moment in the classical heritage. Like a proto-Las Vegas, the Crystal Palace began pop history.

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For more on the Great Exhibition and the Crystal Palace, see:

<http://www.crystalpalacefoundation.org.uk/>

<http://spencer.lib.ku.edu/exhibits/greatexhibition/contents.htm>

Omnibus asked five famous philosophers for their advice on how to get on in life. Here's what they said.